

School-Based Learning in Initial Teacher Education: An Authentic Partnership

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Practice Paper



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ABSTRACT

While practicum experiences are a part of most initial teacher education programmes, Open Polytechnic | Te Pūkenga recognises successful entry into the profession lies in authentic partnerships between the initial teacher education provider and schools. Our programmes enable partner schools to contribute to the delivery of initial teacher education through school-based learning experiences, while enabling pre-service teachers to contribute to their school community. This partnership model is responsive to a strong sector drive to ensure beginning teachers enter the profession 'work-ready' with extensive practical experience alongside theoretical knowledge, and offers benefits to pre-service teachers and schools. This practice paper describes an authentic partner-driven co-construction of the development and delivery of a fundamental element of the new programmes. School-based learning experiences provide opportunities to observe and critique theoretical knowledge in authentic and situated practice.

KEYWORDS

Initial teacher education, practicum, teacher training, school-based learning

BACKGROUND – WHAT IS SCHOOL-BASED LEARNING?

Mā te pā te kaiako e whakatipu
It takes a village to raise a teacher

Recently, Open Polytechnic Te Kuratini Tuwhera o Aotearoa | Te Pūkenga launched a suite of initial teacher education (ITE) programmes for the primary and secondary sectors. Alongside the online course work and practicum experiences runs a school-based learning component, which is fundamental to Open Polytechnic's programmes.

A condition of enrolment into Open Polytechnic's ITE programmes is that partner schools are confirmed for potential students. This requires liaison between the student, the partner school and Open Polytechnic. A representative from the partner school may join Open Polytechnic academics on the enrolment interview panel and participate in the enrolment decision-making. After acceptance, school-based learning begins from as early as the first week of the programme.

The school-based learning is an important, formative component of the programme, which sees full-time pre-service teachers complete two days a week in a partner school throughout their programme. For students in the Bachelor of Teaching programme, this means 140 days of school-based learning, in addition to 120 days of practicum. For students in the Graduate Diploma programmes, this means 40 days of school-based learning, in addition to 80 days of practicum. This offers pre-service teachers opportunities to participate in collaborative learning experiences, become part of a local community, and actively learn alongside qualified teachers. School-based learning differs from practicum in that pre-service teachers can move across the school, observing and interacting with teachers and students in different year levels and curriculum areas. It allows them to be immersed in a professional context and experience the realities of life in schools, and provides a valuable opportunity for teachers in schools to contribute to the richness of learning and inducting pre-service teachers into the teaching profession.

There were three key reasons for including a school-based learning element in these programmes – clear benefits for pre-service teachers, benefits to schools, and an appeal from the school sector to collaborate in the development of new teachers.

BENEFITS FOR PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS

Firstly, it is widely reported in the literature that time spent in schools is the most valuable and influential part of teacher preparation and plays a critical role in the learning-to-teach process of pre-service teachers (Allen, 2009; Busher et al., 2015; Hartsuyker, 2007; Hodges et al., 2017; Palacios Mena & Reedy, 2022; Petrarca & Van Nuland, 2020; Trent, 2013). Indeed, Levine (2006) asserts that high-quality practical experiences that are sustained, begin early, and provide immediate application and connection of theory to real classroom situations are an essential factor in exemplary teacher education programmes.

In addition, there is evidence that having field-based experiences in a host school can be a powerful force in terms of pre-service teachers gaining a sense of “belonging” and “being” – both of which are needed for their development (Dewhurst et al., 2020; Ussher, 2010; Whatman & MacDonald, 2017). These placements need to be long enough for genuine relationships to develop and be maintained (Whatman & MacDonald, 2017). A sense of belonging arguably underpins and supports the connections that pre-service teachers have to their schools and colleagues while on placement (Johnston, 2010; Ussher, 2010), and community acceptance and a sense of belongingness builds confidence and agency (Jones et al., 2014).

These findings commonly relate to practicum or micro-teaching experiences. Where a school-based learning-type programme has been used, results have been similarly positive. The trial of the Collaborative University School Partnership (CUSP) programme developed at the University of Waikato that placed first-year primary pre-service teachers in a classroom for one day a week over two semesters found that they felt better prepared for the practicum (Harlow et al., 2014). The pre-service teachers in the programme reported feeling confident about building relationships with children (98%), reflecting about how children learn (97%), and making connections between theory and practice (95%). They also reported developing a good understanding of what it means to be a teacher (94%) and being ready to take on a teaching role (89%) (Harlow et al., 2014). Similar school-based learning experiences are included in some other teacher education programmes in Aotearoa New Zealand. However, Open Polytechnic’s programmes are the only ones that offer school-based learning for all students throughout their programmes, in both the primary and secondary sectors, and nationwide.

BENEFITS FOR SCHOOLS

The sector consultation process revealed that many schools wished to support existing staff, currently employed as teacher aides, sports coaches, or technology teachers employed on Limited Authority to Teach contracts into the profession. These prospective students enter pre-service training with relationships and contribution in schools already established and highly valued. The partnership model provides an entry point to formal professional qualifications previously unattainable for these staff members. These programmes, which allow students to stay in their schools while training, is of significant benefit to the schools. The pre-service teachers can continue to contribute to the school, becoming increasingly more knowledgeable and skilled. As the pre-service teacher has mentor support throughout the training, it means much less mentor training is required in the first year of teaching, and schools have the support of Open Polytechnic throughout the training year. This support comes in the form of a Partnership Co-ordinator, a position created especially for these programmes, based on input from the consultation partners that they needed a dedicated contact person, and in the form of funding that can be used either for release time or paid directly to the mentor in acknowledgement of their time. Upon the students’ graduation, schools in this situation have immediately available graduates who are already known to the staff, students, whānau, and school community, and who are already familiar with school policies and procedures, the localised curriculum, and more.

PARTNERSHIP

The third reason for including school-based learning in these programmes comes from the ongoing desire for the sector to work in collaboration with higher education institutions in the delivery of ITE in Aotearoa New Zealand. Similarly, Open Polytechnic recognised that a key to success is “genuine/authentic partnership between institutions (the tertiary institution and the school)” (Whatman & MacDonald, 2017, p. 4), and, indeed, there is a growing emphasis internationally on the need for effective and systemic university–school partnerships in order to best prepare pre-service teachers for the profession (Allen, 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Jensen & Reichl, 2011; Patrick et al., 2008).

Specific feedback from school partners during Open Polytechnic’s consultation process requested that pre-service teachers be placed in a ‘home school’ for two days a week and be a part of the school’s Professional Learning and Development programme. Feedback determined that the in-situ model would allow pre-service teachers to develop relationships with school staff and experience the full range of activities that take place in a school. Again, this is supported by literature that purports high-quality ITE programmes are those that can develop and maintain “a close connection between the teacher education programme and the schools in which the teachers teach, including ongoing collaboration between academic and clinical faculties” (Levine, 2006, p. 81). Furthermore, coherence, integration and balance between ITE course work and extended field experiences, and shared professional values and ideas about quality teaching and learning, are essential components of exemplary teacher education programmes (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Le Cornu & Ewing 2008; Levine, 2006).

The partnership component of Open Polytechnic’s ITE programme aims to bring practitioner experience and academic knowledge together for the benefit of the pre-service teachers and the schools and communities they serve. An authentic, non-hierarchical partnership between academics and schoolteachers will create a transformative space for learning opportunities that will better prepare pre-service teachers to be successful (Gutiérrez, 2008; Yeigh & Lynch, 2017; Ziechner, 2010). The development of strong and ongoing partnerships will enable schools to contribute to both the development and delivery of these programmes, and, through the partners’ expertise, we can customise learning contexts and address the needs of both pre-service teachers and the schools who will employ them.

Figure 1 highlights the interrelationships between the partners that support pre-service teachers’ learning. Pre-service teachers (ākonga) are placed in the centre of our model. They are supported, in partnership, by expert staff in Open Polytechnic, and in partner and practicum schools.

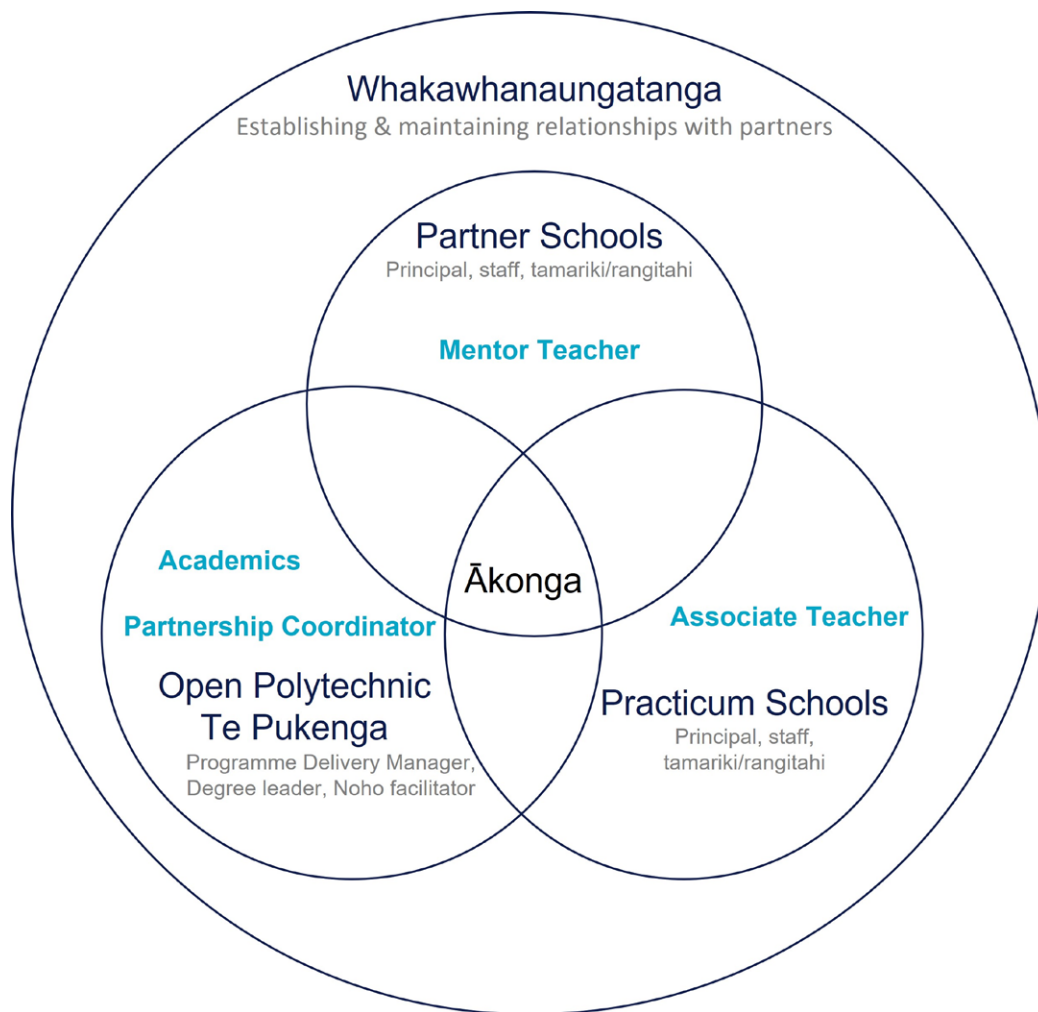


Figure 1. Open Polytechnic's ITE Partnership diagram.

MENTOR TEACHERS

The Mentor Teacher is selected from within the partner school by the partner school principal, or nominee, in consultation with Open Polytechnic's Schools Partnership Co-ordinator. He or she is the manager of school-based learning on behalf of the school and principal. They are the 'face of teaching' for pre-service teachers in the school – someone who will support and guide, interpret experiences, and mentor. An appointed Mentor Teacher is an expert practitioner and proactive teacher who will establish strong rapport with a pre-service teacher and become a critical friend. The success of this relationship is the key to a pre-service teacher's achievement (Lawson et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2014). Ambrosetti and Dekkers (2010) contend that, while mentor roles are complex and multifaceted, mentors and pre-service teachers agree that support and constructive feedback are crucial to the mentoring experiences.

Unlike most practicum experiences, pre-service teachers do not 'shadow' their mentor. Instead, the Mentor Teacher, in consultation with the pre-service teacher, arranges learning experiences across the school, facilitates discussion, and manages learning issues as they arise. Alongside the Mentor Teacher, others in the partner school take on coaching roles for pre-service teachers. These include the senior management team, and other teachers and school staff.

SCHOOL-BASED LEARNING TASKS

To provide some structure to the school-based learning, a range of tasks has been designed that strongly connects to the coursework of the programmes. The tasks are designed to develop incrementally over three phases: Collecting and Talking; Observing and Recording; Teaching and Reflecting.

In the first phase, Collecting and Talking, pre-service teachers are encouraged to learn about their partner school through viewing and discussing the school's localised curriculum, policies, and examples of planning. During the second phase, Observing and Recording, pre-service teachers work alongside teachers in learning contexts and professional discussions, observing and recording how learning is facilitated, how decisions for learning are made, and how relationships and learning environments are developed and maintained. Finally, during the Teaching and Reflecting phase, pre-service teachers have opportunities to work more closely with students, under the supervision and with the support of a classroom teacher.

School-based learning tasks are wide ranging, formal yet flexible, and responsive to the developing needs of pre-service teachers, partner schools, and the programme. They direct pre-service teachers to seek examples of theory enacted in practice, and to critically examine their own responses to teaching and learning experiences. Pre-service teachers are expected to participate in meetings, staff-room activities, professional development, and learning discussions. They are also expected to contribute to their partner school in ways that enable them to demonstrate their own particular skills or passions. This could be in areas such as performing arts, sports, languages and culture, literature, etc.

Authentic experience in the school is paramount. Complementing school-based learning tasks, Mentor Teachers can organise alternative or additional learning experiences within the school. This could include participating in specific learning events and observations related to the special character of the school, undertaking research and planning, and participating in the general life of the school.

LEARNINGS FROM INITIAL IMPLEMENTATION

Open Polytechnic's initial teacher education model delivers a new approach to developing teachers for Aotearoa, and we acknowledge that it will take some time before it is fully understood by schools and prospective students. Partnerships rely on equal commitment and understanding from both parties, and we have faced some challenges in securing partner and practicum schools for potential students because of the challenges of introducing a new and different model. Many schools are still recovering post-Covid-19 and have reported that, while they may like to be involved in the future, they do not currently have the capacity. Some secondary schools have indicated that they do not have the right subject specialist to undertake mentoring for a particular student, potentially signifying a lack of understanding of the Mentor Teacher role, which highlights the importance of clear communication and easily accessible information. There is a need to further socialise the programmes, particularly the school-based learning element, in various education publications, at principals' and association conferences, through inviting potential partners to information webinars, and through inviting registrations of interest.

Despite some early lack of understanding, where pre-service teachers already had an established relationship with a school, as a teacher aide, coach, or through a Limited Authority to Teach contract, the implementation of school-based learning has gone smoothly. We have also received feedback that this model particularly suits rural and semi-rural schools, and urban schools who do not have existing agreements with other teacher education providers.

CONCLUSION

An authentic partnership that supports effective school-based learning is an integral element of Open Polytechnic's ITE programmes. Authentic partnerships enable the school sector to actively participate in the development of new teachers, and actively empower pre-service teachers through access to a wealth of expertise across the

school. Through this partnership pre-service teachers are exposed to a range of experiences and can contribute to the ongoing culture and community of their partner school, providing invaluable benefits to their professional development. Given the long-term nature of the partnership, the benefits to pre-service teachers, schools, and their communities are far-reaching, enduring and mutually satisfying.

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Kirsten Price has worked as an in-service and pre-service lecturer, subject advisor, secondary school teacher – middle management, and as a lead advisor for the Ministry of Education, Aotearoa New Zealand. She is currently working in postgraduate education, facilitating initial teacher education for Open Polytechnic | Te Pūkenga. She holds a Master of Fine Arts and is an exhibiting artist. Her research interests include visual arts and design education, career education, and leadership and management advice. Her current focus is the engagement and motivation of rangitahi/young people in and through the arts – specifically, but not exclusively, the visual arts. "In art there is no right or wrong."

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